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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000450

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: MAJOR MILITARY MOVEMENTS IN ABKHAZIA AND
SOUTH OSSETIA

REF: A. TBILISI 358
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 488

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment. International monitors continue to report to us their observations of significant military assets and movements inside the Abkhaz and South Ossetian administrative boundaries, including tanks, artillery, and personnel. The assets observed exceed the limits the Georgians have voluntarily and unilaterally placed upon themselves on the south side of the boundaries. Although UNOMIG determined that recent reports of Russian border guards near the Abkhaz boundary were unfounded, Russian military forces remain in place, and none of the monitoring organizations has sufficient access to determine the full strength of Russian, Abkhaz or South Ossetian forces near the boundaries. Russian allegations of a significant buildup on the Georgian side -- and a resulting increase in tension -- have not only been refuted by the monitoring organizations, but seem designed to deflect attention from the military activities on the northern side of the boundaries. Such misdirection could be a dangerous effort to lay the groundwork for blaming Georgia for any provocations or escalation. End summary and comment.

ABKHAZIA

[1](#)2. (C) In a February 26 summary of "Heavy Armament in the Zone of Conflict" (which excluded the Kodori Valley), UNOMIG reported the following totals of equipment confirmed to be held by the various sides in areas adjacent to the administrative boundary. (Note: These numbers reflect confirmed observations, not exhaustive totals. UNOMIG has been restricted in its freedom of movement on the Abkhaz side of the boundary in recent months, but not restricted at all on the Georgian-controlled side; it is therefore likely that the figures given for the Russian/Abkhaz side are underestimates, and those given for the Georgian-controlled side are closer to the actual totals. Post is not aware that this summary has been reported to UN headquarters through official channels. End note.)

-- Russian Federation Forces: 10 T-72 tanks, 6 2S3 152mm self-propelled artillery pieces (howitzers), 1 lightly armored multi-purpose vehicle (MT-LB), and 32 armored personnel carriers (BTRs). Three of the tanks may have since moved out (see paragraph 5).

-- Abkhaz forces: 7 T-55 tanks, 3 ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft cannon, 3 MT-LBs, and 3 BTRs.

-- Georgian Interior Ministry forces: 22 COBRA Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs), 2 JLTVs with machine guns, 2 armored ambulance JLTVs.

[1](#)3. (C) One of the provisions of the Georgian government's Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the EU Monitoring

Mission (EUMM) is a ban on artillery bigger than 120mm in caliber within 15 kilometers of the Abkhaz administrative boundary; this provision includes all tanks. None of the 17 tanks and 6 howitzers counted by UNOMIG on the Russian/Abkhaz side of the boundary would therefore be allowed under the MOU.

¶4. (C) The Russians have been harshly critical of the COBRAs used by the Georgian side to move Interior Ministry forces around the area adjacent to the boundary, calling them inherently destabilizing; although UNOMIG has observed only two vehicles armed with a machine gun, any of them could potentially be armed with one. International monitors told us that even when armed with a machine gun, it was impossible to call these "offensive" military equipment. The Georgians do call these "offensive" military equipment. The Georgians counter that 11 individuals have been killed since the August war, many of them by sniper fire, and their personnel therefore need the protection. Although the EUMM has questioned the need for the COBRAs, they are allowed under the MOU, and the EUMM itself uses very similar vehicles for its own personnel. (The British Ambassador recently commented in a western Ambassadors' meeting that it was pretty hard to criticize the Georgian COBRA deployments when European nations will not send their own monitors up to the boundary areas unless they are in such armored vehicles.) Furthermore, compared to the 26 COBRAs, UNOMIG has counted 32 BTRs on the Russian/Abkhaz side, which can transport more personnel and support more lethal weaponry. The MOU allows no more than 5 armored vehicles with a gun between 60mm and 120mm in caliber.

¶5. (C) On February 25, UNOMIG monitors determined that

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reports from the press that Russia had introduced 180 border guards to the area along the administrative boundary were incorrect. Russian forces remain a prominent presence in the conflict zone, however; the press stories may have been a corruption of a series of what looked to UNOMIG like troop rotations. On February 28, UNOMIG monitors compiled information about a series of movements in the previous days involving 25 BTRs, 39 trucks and 3 tanks moving north and 20 BTRs and 25 trucks moving south. On February 13, Abkhaz de facto presidential representative in Gali Ruslan Kishmaria told visiting U.S. officials that Abkhaz forces had taken control along the boundary, and Russian forces had backed away but remained in positions somewhat behind the Abkhaz. With limited access, however, it remains difficult for UNOMIG to determine the total number of Russian and Abkhaz forces arrayed in Abkhazia, or their position, with any precision.

¶6. (C) Russia has alleged that Georgia has deployed 2,000 forces along the areas adjacent to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After EUMM Head of Mission Hansjoerg Haber forcefully rejected these allegations when they were made in Geneva on February 17, the EUMM, as well as UNOMIG, also conducted a series of unannounced inspections of the Georgian side of the boundaries the week of Feb. 17 to doublecheck. Both organizations determined that the allegations were unfounded (ref A).

SOUTH OSSETIA

¶7. (C) The EUMM certification of Georgia's compliance with its MOU applied to the area outside South Ossetia as well. The OSCE also confirmed in a summary report for the period February 16 - March 1 that it had not observed any visible presence of Georgian armed forces in areas adjacent to South Ossetia. No international monitoring organization has regular access to South Ossetia, so information about military movements inside the administrative boundary is extremely limited and based primarily on what can be observed from the Georgian-controlled side of the boundary. Even these limited observations indicate, however, that there is a significant military presence within a short distance of the

boundary. In the same summary report, the OSCE noted a large Russian armed forces encampment northwest of Tskhinvali and supplementary posts to the east of the city.

18. (C) On February 20, OSCE monitors observed what it eventually determined to be a battery of 5 self-propelled howitzers in the area of Dvani, just inside the administrative boundary, southwest of Tskhinvali. It also observed a Fire Direction Center vehicle (which enables targeting), communications equipment, and ammunition. The OSCE asked Colonel Tarasov, the Russian commander of South Ossetia, about the equipment on February 20; he claimed the equipment was Ossetian, but he seemed to the OSCE to be flustered by the question. By February 25 monitors determined the artillery was gone from that location, although the supporting equipment remained, which suggested to the OSCE that there might be an interest in being able to restore the battery on short notice. On March 2 the OSCE reported four of the artillery pieces were back in the same location. Although unable to establish the nature of the artillery with 100% accuracy, OSCE believes them to be either 140mm 2S4s or 152mm 2S5s (with a slight possibility of 2SMs), both of which would exceed the limits of Georgia's MOU. Q2SMs), both of which would exceed the limits of Georgia's MOU.

19. (C) EUMM and OSCE monitors regularly observe tanks, BTRs, and armored infantry fighting vehicles (BMPs) just inside the administrative boundary. In some recent examples, OSCE monitors observed three BMPs at a Russian/Ossetian position south of Orchosani on March 1. This position is within a few hundred meters of the administrative boundary at the point where the boundary itself is within a few hundred meters of the main east-west highway, and the position is clearly visible from the highway itself. OSCE monitors also observed four Russian battle tanks moving between Tbeti (just inside the administrative boundary, west of Tskhinvali) and Tamarasheni on February 24. On February 28, the OSCE observed Georgian Interior Ministry forces fortifying their observation post in Odzisi, and on March 5 the EUMM reported the Georgian forces moved the post 100 meters closer to the joint Russian/Ossetian post to the north. The Georgians explained to the OSCE the change was in response to a buildup of Russian forces in the area of Akhmaji in the Akhalkgori Valley, just inside the administrative boundary and across a narrow river from Odzisi. The Georgians reported seeing multiple rocket launchers, mortars, anti-aircraft weapons, and artillery deployed in recent days and 12 tanks moving north of Odzisi. OSCE monitors themselves observed 5 BMPs, all armed with a 30mm automatic gun, and one T-72 tank, at the Russian position north of Akhmaji. At the joint

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Russian/Ossetian position north of Odzisi, the monitors observed three BMPs and one T-72.

COMMENT: Don't Throw Stones at Glass Houses

10. (C) Despite the monitoring organizations' repeated findings of no military buildup by Georgia, Russia has repeated such allegations since February meetings in Geneva (ref B). It has even accused Georgia of having specific elements -- tanks and rocket launchers -- that Georgia does not have near the boundaries, but Russia does. The allegations could be perceived as an effort both to direct the international community's attention away from Russia's own activities north of the boundaries and to keep open the possibility of blaming provocations or escalations on the Georgians. Combined with Russian unwillingness to schedule another round of Geneva talks before June, as well as with the possibly expiry of the OSCE and UNOMIG mandates in June, the overall effort could be laying the groundwork for Russia to keep its options open in the occupied territories this spring -- including the military option. In our effort to encourage Georgia's transparency and restraint, we need to continue to push for full transparency and restraint throughout the entire territory of Georgia. Even though

international monitors have limited access to Abkhazia and no access to South Ossetia (a reminder of the importance of renewing the monitors' mandates), they have still been able to provide solid evidence refuting Russia's claims. In our view, allowing those claims to go unchallenged could lead Russia to believe it has available a pretext for renewed military action.

TEFFT